What monetary policy for the ECB in 2013?

By Paul Hubert

After the monthly meeting of the Board of Governors of the European Central Bank on 7 February 2013, the ECB decided to hold its key interest rate at 0.75%. The analysis of the economic situation by Mario Draghi made during the press conference afterwards pointed to contrasting developments justifying the status quo. In a recent study, we showed that the inflation forecasts of the ECB can shed new light on future trends in interest rates.

The status quo can be explained by a number of mutually offsetting factors. The banks have started to repay some of the cash obtained through the LTRO facility (140 billion euros out of 489 billion), which reflects an improvement in their financial position, while at the same time lending to non-financial firms is continuing to contract (-1.3% in December 2012) and consumer loans are still at very low levels.

From a macroeconomic viewpoint, the situation in the euro zone is not giving clear signals about future monetary policy: after shrinking by 0.2% in the second quarter of 2012, real GDP in the euro zone fell another 0.1% in the third quarter, while inflation, as measured on an annual basis, decreased from 2.6% in August 2012 to 2% in January 2013 and is expected to drop below the 2% mark in the coming months based on the figures for GDP growth and for current and anticipated oil prices.

Furthermore, the inflation expectations of private agents, as measured by the *Survey of Professional Forecasters*, remain firmly anchored around the ECB's inflation target. In the fourth quarter of 2012, expectations were for 1.9% inflation for the years 2013 and 2014. Given that the target of “below but close to 2%” has now been reached, and with a euro zone in recession and unemployment at record levels, the ECB could give a boost to real activity. However, it anticipates that economic activity should gradually pick up in the second half of 2013, partly due to the accommodative monetary policy being followed today.

Given expectations, and in light of the historically low levels of key interest rates and the lag in the transmission of monetary policy to the real economy [1], a future rate cut seems very unlikely. One final element is sending out mixed messages: the recent rise of the euro – though it is still far from record levels – could nip in the bud the weak economic recovery that is underway, and could in the eyes of some justify support for export sectors [2].

In a recent OFCE working paper (No. 2013-04), we discuss how the ECB could use its inflation forecasts to improve the implementation of its monetary policy. We propose a new element to shed light on future developments in interest rates, based on the macroeconomic projections published quarterly by the ECB. In this study on the effects of the publication of the ECB’s inflation forecasts on the inflation expectations of private agents, we show that a 1 percentage point reduction in the ECB’s inflation projections is associated with a key interest rate cut by the ECB of 1.2 percentage points in the next two quarters. We conclude that the ECB’s inflation forecasts are a tool that helps to better understand current monetary policy decisions and to anticipate future decisions.

The latest inflation projections, published in December 2012, were 1.6% and 1.4% for the years 2013 and 2014, respectively.

The publication on March 7th of new projections could provide a further indication of the direction monetary policy is likely to take in 2013.

[1] On average, a change in the key rates is estimated to have an impact on inflation after 12 months and on GDP after 18 months.

[2] Remember, however, that about 64% of trade in the euro zone is conducted with euro zone partners, and thus is independent of fluctuations in exchange rates.